

CROWDSOURCING YOUR FAMILY RESEARCH

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CROWDSOURCING: The practice of obtaining needed services, ideas, or content by soliciting contributions from a large group of people and especially from the online community rather than from traditional employees or suppliers.

— Merriam-Webster

The word “Crowdsourcing” is a product of the Internet age; it was created in 2005 by Jeff Howe and Mark Robinson, two editors at Wired magazine, by combining “crowd” with “outsourcing.” The idea is to get many people to help on a project, with the cumulative effort drawing from the work of everyone. It’s possible that none of the people involved will have the final answer, but together, a consensus will emerge.

Wired published a story on the concept in June 2006. Two years later, the word was used in scholarly research, and by 2013, Crowdsourcing was used as the title of a book.

Wikipedia might be the best-known example of crowdsourcing. Fundraising websites such as GoFundme also qualify as crowdsourcing. Both of these are based on the Internet, but the thinking behind crowdsourcing has been around for centuries. In simple terms, it can be boiled down to this: Seeking, and getting, help from many people at one time.

In the middle of the 19th Century, the Oxford English Dictionary called for volunteers to identify words in the English language. Over seventy years, they received more than six million submissions. In this century, the television show Who Wants To Be A Millionaire featured a lifeline called “Ask the Audience,” in which contestants could draw on the collective wisdom of the studio audience.

But what about family history research?

Crowdsourcing has always been a vital part of what we do, because we have always tried to find other family members who might have information we can use. The commitment to sharing was made stronger with the founding of the New England Historic Genealogical Society in 1845, the Society of Genealogists in 1911, and many other societies around the world.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints created the Genealogical Society of Utah in 1894, as part of the church’s commitment to recognizing ancestors. For decades church members submitted information about their families for temple work. Starting on January 1, 1942, the church required the use of family group sheets to keep track of information, and

encouraged its members to submit these sheets to a central repository – the Records Department in Salt Lake City. By July that year, so many sheets had been submitted that the church had to bring in extra people to deal with the backlog.

Those sheets were gathered into a single collection, and provided a massive store of information for the Family History Library. In 1969, computers were introduced to help the process, and members were encouraged to get information on three generations, and then four. This information was effectively crowdsourced – and indexing was crowdsourced as well. (More information on the history of the Genealogical Society of Utah can be found in the book *Hearts Turned to the Fathers*, by James B. Allen, Jessie L. Embry, and Kahlie B. Mehr.)

Volunteers are continuing to index records for FamilySearch, as the LDS effort is known today, and for other websites. Volunteer indexing is perhaps the best example of crowdsourcing in family history research. Consider Find a Grave or Billion Graves, which rely on contributions from genealogists in all areas. Many record transcriptions are being done through crowdsourcing, with eager volunteers making these old documents accessible and searchable.

Crowdsourcing through DNA

Genetic genealogy is based on crowdsourcing as well. Personal DNA testing has allowed for the creation of databases based on our spit. We might not be able to determine, using paper records, a relationship with another person, but the clues are in our saliva. Comparing our results with the tests from other matches can help place people in our families. The more people who test, the more value we will have from our own test.

In other words, the power of the crowd will allow us to break down brick walls like never before.

Where do we start?

The FamilySearch Wiki will often be the best place to start crowdsourcing your genealogical work. It provides answers for family historians of all skill levels, because many of the basic questions have been asked already, in one way or another.

If you have specific questions, look for mailing lists on Rootsweb or message boards on Ancestry. Before asking a question, however, you should determine exactly what your question is, and that will be based on what you have already discovered.

Try the locality pages on the FamilySearch Wiki, because many records are based on locations. Check Facebook as well, because many keeners have set up pages dealing with specific areas.

Posting your work online might bring feedback from relatives, but your success rate might be hampered because of the bad habits of others. Flawed trees have been on the Internet since the earliest days of the World Wide Web, and too many perpetrators of these trees are

unwilling to accept help from others. That means many skilled people have given up trying to help.

If your research is in the British Isles, try Family Tree Forum, a free site where members can research and socialize. The site, which was founded in 2006, is dedicated to assisting all genealogists of all skill and experience levels.

Registered members can ask for advice or offer tips to other researchers. Registering as a member will give access to the names database, where searches are possible using names, birthplaces and birth years. Members can also add their GEDCOM files to the forum's database.

Blogs can work as well. Many people have used their blogs to pose questions – but these blogs need a large following to be effective.

Maureen Taylor, who is known as The Photo Detective, has placed many photographs online, along with requests for information. Who are these women? Where is this place? She usually gets answers, thanks to her large audience. You might not get as many answers, but her success should inspire you to try.

Crowdsourcing does not have to be online. Attend meetings of local genealogical societies as well as conferences. (By being here, you've made a good start!) Here is an idea: A society could devote a monthly meeting to members' brick walls, with each member allowed two minutes to outline the problem and what has been tried, and then other members will be invited to contribute their thoughts on what else might work.

I have asked questions in my columns in the Times Colonist and in genealogy magazines. About half of those questions have been answered.

What about people long departed?

There is still hope. They provided information to census-takers, to relatives, and to local historians. Their words were recorded in some way, somewhere. Search the census; search for local histories; search Google for any references to your family (provided it's not Smith or Jones) in an ancestral community.

Look outside the standard genealogical sources! Try, for example, Google Books or the Internet Archive.